

# **Collapse of stout party**

## **Eden, Suez and America**

**Simon Matthews**

**H**ave you heard the one about the Conservative Prime Minister who is disowned by the right-wing of the Tory Party for not seeing through a bombastic and nationalist policy, and disowned by its left-wing for duplicity and generally ridiculed by the wider public?

Forget 2017. Instead, proceed to 1956 for the full story . . . and a very different world where the UK standard rate of income tax was 42.5% (8s 6d in the pound), unemployment was non-existent (the lowest ever level of 185,000 was recorded in mid-1955) and UK was building five or six times the amount of public housing that it does now, all fully funded by central government. The time, in fact, of Sir Anthony Eden: a Prime Minister who never lost a bye-election and who remained astonishingly popular despite and because of the aberration – if it was that – which brought about his downfall. For decades now, in football parlance, Eden has been struggling to avoid relegation. Not quite bottom of the League (Bonar-Law, aka ‘the unknown PM’) and maybe not yet a bookies’ favourite for the drop (like Chamberlain or, more recently, Cameron) but clearly in trouble.

There have been efforts to mend his reputation, most recently by D. R. Thorpe, an academic who specialises in salvaging the careers of ‘underrated’ politicians. His Eden job<sup>1</sup> followed similar efforts on Selwyn Lloyd (1989) and Douglas-Home (1996). Writing in 2002, with access to just about everything then in the public domain, Thorpe draws to our attention many now forgotten details about Eden’s background and career, particularly in the post-1945 period when the UK still thought itself a major international player and had not yet been publicly disabused of this by the US.

For most of his political life Eden was revered as the finest Foreign Secretary the UK had produced in modern times. He graced an endless schedule of summits, conferences, negotiations, diplomatic visits and crises with his erudition, multilingual skills and matinee idol profile. Latterly he developed some original ideas about how to go about solving some of the thorny problems of the post 1945 era; and, importantly, was unafraid of attempting to implement them.

At the Berlin gathering of ‘the Big Four’ in January-February 1954 he floated the idea of a settlement for Germany, that would have ended the

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> D. R. Thorpe, *Eden: The Life and Times of Anthony Eden, First Earl of Avon, 1897-1977* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003)

occupation of the country and brought about unification, in exchange for Germany becoming a neutral non-aligned state in central Europe. Now forgotten, this was taken seriously at the time and a very similar version of it was agreed for Austria a year later. It failed to transpire because, although attractive to the Soviet Union, the French were not sufficiently in favour of Germany being non-aligned (preferring, instead, a pro-France Germany) and the US hostile, wanting a pro-west, pro-NATO Germany.

## Geneva

Eden's reputation peaked at the Geneva Conference, which was held a few months later and was the last time the UK convened and enacted a major international diplomatic event in its own right. The Conference was designed to produce a lasting settlement to the instability in Indo-China – following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu – and Eden wanted a solution that would allow France to relinquish direct colonial rule without losing face, while still retaining a role in the area. The conference agreed the *de facto* temporary separation of Vietnam into northern and southern territories, followed by elections in both and negotiations between whoever won these and the Emperor Bao Dai on the formation of a national government. Simultaneously Cambodia and Laos would gain independence. The intention with all three new countries appears to have been that, albeit self-governing, they would have remained part of a Francophone domain rather like what later did happen with the French territories in Africa after 1960.

In July 1954 Eden's proposals were ratified by the UK, France, China and the Soviet Union. The electoral arrangements were to be overseen by India ('non-aligned'), Canada (pro-west) and Poland (pro-east). The US did not participate, did not agree with the recommendations and made it clear it reserved the right to act independently. Traditionally regarding anything 'China' as their preserve, they considered Eden naïve (at best), the Emperor Bao a clear Communist stooge and Ho Chi Minh a ruthless conspirator controlled by Moscow. Within a few years, with the US actively promoting dissent and opposing anything less than a clear Communist defeat, it was game over and the descent had begun into the final phase of the long and miserable Vietnam War and the loss of 3.3 million lives. Eden's alternative was surely better than this.

A shoo-in as Prime Minister after Churchill quit in April 1955, Eden, having tried novel diplomatic approaches in Europe and the Far East, made a speech on 9 November saying that Israel should give up some of the territory it had occupied since 1949. Without listing here all the tit-for-tat operations on either side, since its creation Israel had frequently intruded into its neighbours. The most notable of these being at Qibya in 1953 when 69 Jordanians (mostly women and children) were massacred. The UK had a treaty with Jordan which obligated the UK to come to that country's assistance if requested. Fear of this being triggered was the starting point of Eden's difficulties and the root of his wish to bring about a re-ordering in the Middle East, as he had tried a year

earlier in Indo-China. Under his instructions the UK prepared Operation Cordage (January 1956). This would enforce the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty of 1948 by destroying the Israeli Air Force in a surprise attack, after which Israel would accede to reasonable Arab demands in a process refereed by the UK. It seems likely, given the personnel within the UK defence hierarchy, that the US and Israel would have learnt of this proposal.

The UK's tribulations with Egypt's President Nasser, far from being the be all and end all of Eden's worries, thus ran parallel with this. Installed in power after a CIA-sanctioned coup<sup>2</sup> that saw off Egypt's dissolute King Faroukh (shades here of Emperor Bao Dai), Nasser quickly turned out not to be pro-west but agnostic in that regard. Nasser was happy to deal with the Soviet bloc and initially reliant on various German (some ex-Nazi) advisors as Egypt became a leading player in the non-aligned group of nations. When the US tired of Nasser's manoeuvres (July 1956), they withdrew funding for the Aswan Dam project. Nasser retaliated by nationalising the Suez Canal a week later. With the UK having only three days reserves of oil, Eden worried a great deal from this moment onwards about Nasser being able to affect the performance of the UK economy. The perceived risk was that Nasser would impose tolls, taxes, levies and encourage a general slowness in dealing with shipping passing through the canal, while extracting concessions that would benefit Egypt. But how, and against whom, would the UK act?

## **Suez**

**At** this point Israel undertook further incursions into Jordan (13 September and 10 October 1956) that left 109 Jordanian military and police dead. Eden now feared that Jordan would activate the 1948 treaty and require the UK to attack Israel. Four days later the French helpfully suggested that Israel be invited to join UK and France in an attack on Egypt: it was judged that Nasser would be overthrown and replaced with a 'moderate' pro-west regime and Israel placed in a position, as a junior partner, where an ascendant UK and France would dictate terms to the participants in the Middle East at another grand international conference. But as with Eden's other projects, the US were having none of it. Nor did the Commonwealth back the UK: India and Pakistan were in the non-aligned group of nations, South Africa took no view, Canada wanted a UN solution, Australia backed the UK publicly but did nothing, New Zealand committed some forces but withdrew them once a shooting war began.

But fear of a request from Jordan and/or of Nasser blackmailing the UK drove Eden on. Having reached a secret agreement with France and the UK (24

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<sup>2</sup> Codenamed Operation Fat Fucker by the CIA. After his abrupt departure, King Faroukh's private and extensive collection of pornography was the subject of some attention.

October 1956), Israel attacked Egypt on 28 October.<sup>3</sup> Two days later the UK and France began five days of air attacks on selected Egyptian military targets. Halfway through the attacks Lord Mountbatten, the First Sea Lord, advised Eden that the operation should be called off as it would be 'too costly politically'. It is not clear on whose behalf Mountbatten was speaking; but notwithstanding this intervention, UK and French troops invaded Egypt (5 November) only for Eden to order a halt within 24 hours. In the US voting was taking place in the presidential elections at precisely that moment and, although the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket breezed home with 57% of the popular vote, the US had insisted on an immediate ceasefire.

It's never been really clear why the UK and France didn't invade at the same time that their air bombardment started. Had they done so Eden and Guy Mollet, the French PM, might have prevailed. Instead, because Nasser had closed and blocked the canal at the start of hostilities, the UK and France sought IMF loans. These were refused (via a phone call from Secretary of State Dulles to Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold MacMillan) on 6 November. It was made clear that nothing would be forthcoming unless they withdrew and let the UN tidy up the area, with Egypt remaining in control of the canal. The US also indicated that it would refuse to export oil to either country unless they complied. It is accepted that MacMillan conveyed this to the cabinet in ways that exaggerated the impact non-compliance might have on the UK economy, and a ceasefire was then decided upon.

But the UK and France could clearly have completed occupation of the canal zone before any US fiscal action kicked in. The UK commander reckoned it would take 'up to' 11 November to secure all the objectives. The difference, then, was about carrying on for a further 2-3 days; in any event, even if the US started an oil embargo against its main allies, the UK had *de facto* access to oil supplies from Kuwait and Qatar – and France had direct access to those from Algeria. It is also striking that the point wasn't made publicly in 1956 as loudly as it might have been that given the US would not have allowed Panama control over the Panama Canal, they had little moral right to prevent the UK and France having control over the Suez Canal. Equally, Eden had the option of suspending Sterling convertibility, and closing the Sterling area to the Dollar for a couple of weeks until matters died down. Why didn't he at least indicate that he might do so?

Eden and Mollet demanded a summit with Eisenhower but this was refused. The UK public were not much bothered by this. Suez was popular and Eden stratospherically so. His position in Parliament also appeared secure. It was hardly a scenario, then, for urgent change. But enter at this point Alan Lennox-Boyd MP (Colonial Secretary) who asked the novelist Ian Fleming to

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<sup>3</sup> The existence of the secret agreement – The Protocol of Sevres – was denied at the time and for many years subsequently. Knowledge that such a document existed, though, was fairly widespread. Eden's denial of it, in the House of Commons, led to the accusations that he was not conducting government business in a sufficiently moral fashion.

make his holiday home in Jamaica available to Eden so that the Prime Minister could 'recuperate'. Eden agreed to go abroad. Why did he do so? The history books, diaries and official records are all silent on this. Was it made clear to him that his denials of collusion with Israel were known to be lies? Many people suspected as much but few had actual proof. Did the US make it clear they would put proof of this, provided by friendly elements in France, the UK and Israel, into the public domain unless he went? During his absence (22 November – 14 December 1956) the business of re-structuring the UK government, to make it more amenable to the US, got under way.<sup>4</sup> This took the form of Harold MacMillan having a series of private meetings at the US embassy and Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, publicly promoting the need to address the 'moral crisis' facing the nation.

Throughout this Eden's ill-health, with a long-standing liver and gall bladder problem, was played up. And he was indeed ill. Suffering from severe fevers that were not life-threatening, and he had been prescribed the accepted medicine at that time for those symptoms: amphetamines and purple hearts (which had the side effect of causing mood swings, impaired judgement and paranoia). However, was he so ill that he couldn't have carried on as PM? This seems unlikely. On the other hand, though, the five days gap between the aerial bombardment and the land invasion at Suez suggests he wasn't thinking clearly. Carrying it out during the US Presidential election was also asking for trouble, whatever the intentions. (Though Eden was never fully in control of the timetable. Nasser's actions and delaying tactics adroitly ensured the UK would have difficulties 'going it alone', and took into account the date of the US Presidential elections.) And, apart from that, was it even necessary? Even in 1956 oil could have been diverted via the Cape of Good Hope (as it was 1939-1945) and the Suez Canal was later closed between 1967 and 1975 without the UK economy being stricken.

Eden returned – intending to stay on as PM – but found things too far developed and quit on 9 January 1957. Eden had lost support across the Conservative Party in Parliament, with the left-wing because of his collusion with France and Israel ('moral grounds') and with the right-wing because he hadn't seen the operation through. To continue footballing comparisons: he was a manager – popular with the supporters – who was sacked by the board after an embarrassing home defeat by non-league opposition.

After Eden's departure MacMillan 'emerged' as the new PM, to markedly less public support (the Conservatives lost 3 by-elections in February and

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<sup>4</sup> Fleming's wife, Ann, was a personal friend of Eden's wife. Eden's wife was also Churchill's niece and Churchill considered Eden's failure to see Suez through to its conclusion – once it had been started – as a major mistake. Lennox-Boyd, in turn, was a close political ally of Churchill. In another twist Ann Fleming was also having an affair with Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell (whom Eden personally disliked). Fleming's property in Jamaica was not particularly well appointed and was somewhat isolated. During Eden's stay at the address local police turned away visitors. It would not be fanciful to conclude that Eden was being sent somewhere isolated and deliberately taken 'out of the loop'.

March of 1958). Early on in his tenure MacMillan effectively traded away the UK's independent nuclear deterrent via the US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA). Had MacMillan discussed the prospect of this during his previous meetings at the US Embassy? UK governments had originally taken the view that the UK should develop, manufacture and own a deterrent that was entirely funded and controlled by the UK. A policy started by Attlee after Ernest Bevin had memorably proclaimed 'we must have one with a Union Jack on it', this had been brought to fruition by Churchill and Eden in 1952. Under the terms of the MDA, post 1958, the UK and US 'co-operated' – which meant that the UK got some things (a bit) cheaper, but became gradually more reliant on the US.<sup>5</sup>

In retirement Eden became President of the Royal Shakespeare Company where he preferred the modern productions directed by Peter Brook. He was still in charge when Brook did his anti-Vietnam war piece 'US' (1966) and was interviewed on TV in 1966 suggesting the US should cease bombing North Vietnam and make peace overtures to Hanoi.

Thorpe is at great pains throughout his book to insist that Eden was *not* pro-European integration then, and wouldn't have been now, were he still alive. This clearly reflects the readers Thorpe is writing for, but it ignores the fact that the EU didn't exist in 1956. When one learns that Eden suggested that Oscar Kokoschka should do his portrait (Kokoschka did one of Konrad Adenauer) and was also fluent in French and German, the idea that he was anti-Europe seems implausible. In fact the case can be made that, were he around today, Eden might well have been very pro-EU. Edward Heath – the most pro-European PM the UK has yet produced – was appointed Government Chief Whip by Eden in late 1955, thus owing much of his advance in politics to Eden's patronage. Later, John Major – another PM with (reasonably) pro-EU views – was entirely typical of those who joined the party and rose within it during the Heath period. The Conservative Party represented by Eden, Heath and Major really does seem a long way away now.

## **Another Suez?**

**I**n the last 12 months Suez has been revisited with some commentators saying that Brexit will be 'another Suez', implying that it will be a type of national humiliation with Brexit being either diluted or reversed on the 'instructions' of Washington, or at any rate powerful external forces. This ignores the fact that the reasons Eden didn't survive in 1956 were:

- (1) he was repeatedly taking a line in world affairs which advocated very different views to the US, and was prepared to act accordingly;
- (2) the US then was run by people who regarded the UK as an essential ally in the nuclear stand-off with the Soviet Union.

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<sup>5</sup> Blair scrapped the UK's remaining stockpile of freefall nuclear bombs in 1998 as they had been built 20+ years earlier and, by the '90s, aircraft delivered bombs were considered ineffective anyway. The UK nuclear deterrent thus became completely dependent on US launch systems, and clearly no longer 'independent'. Part of the day-to-day theatre of UK politics demands that (most) politicians keep up a pretence that it is.

Neither of these factors apply in 2017. Theresa May and the UK have no significant world role and the current US leadership is not overly bothered if the UK is its ally or not in its various tribulations with North Korea, Iran and Russia. Instead, we are left with the thought that the couple of weeks of intrigue that 'did' for Eden were essentially a coup carried out within UK politics by an establishment that regards cleaving to the US as an essential ritual.

Was this the first overt change carried out within the UK at the behest of the US and their local supporters? Have there been others? The general election of 1970 that resulted in a surprise Wilson defeat inevitably comes to mind. The US – and many within the UK's intelligence and military – wanted Wilson out in 1970. The election that year was characterised by an extensive campaign targeting marginal seats, run by Ronan O'Rahilly, from an offshore radio station owned by a Swiss-based electronics company later shown to have had a connection to the Lockerbie bombing.<sup>6</sup>

Following the Suez parallel, if Clinton had won the US Presidency in November 2016, is it possible the UK might have dumped Brexit by now? The 'centre' emboldened by numerous US telephone calls and briefings and, rallying behind whoever is flavour of the month in respectable politics, would have found a way to drop the matter. But Trump is President, not Clinton. This hasn't and won't happen and – carrying on the football terminology – we are now resigning (or being expelled) from the league after failing to fulfil our fixtures.

So, does the election of Trump mean, ironically for keen Brexiteers and hopefully for hard-line Corbyn fans, the end of US interference in UK matters? Or are we merely living in a country where it's all just legerdemain and stage management by an increasingly deluded people?

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<sup>6</sup> See my 'The life and times of Simon Dee' in *Lobster* 58 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/issue58.php>>.

A director of Mebo Electronics, the Swiss electronics company, was questioned at the Lockerbie inquest and stated that he would call George Bush Snr. as a character witness if he were ever charged with an offence